

Michał Kobierecki

RUSSIA AND ITS INTERNATIONAL IMAGE: FROM SOCHI OLYMPIC GAMES TO ANNEXING CRIMEA¹

ABSTRACT: The aim of the article is to analyze the change of the Russian Federation's international image in the light of two significant events: the Olympic Winter Games in 2014 in Sochi and the annexation of Crimea. According to the first hypothesis, one of the main aims for hosting the Olympic Games was to improve the international prestige of Russia. Shortly after the Olympics Russia increased its activity in Eastern Ukraine, which resulted in the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Therefore the article is also aimed to investigate whether by annexing Crimea Russia squandered the possible positive effects of hosting the Olympics in terms of its international image.

KEYWORDS: International image of Russia, Olympic Games in Sochi, Annexation of Crimea, sport and politics

The Olympic Winter Games in Russian city of Sochi was the most important sports mega-event of the beginning of 2014. Shortly after, the world witnessed one of the biggest crises in European politics that resulted in the annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation, although the events are still in progress. These two occurrences are completely oppositional in terms of international image of Russia. The Sochi Olympics were meant to improve the prestige of Russia worldwide. Russian involvement in the Ukraine on the other hand is regarded as undoing all of the efforts concerning hosting Olympic Winter Games.

Hosting a sports mega-event in most cases has strong political meaning and can be aimed to enhance a nation's prestige, praise its political system, promote tourism, and promote the country in

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general. The attempt to acquire prestige is typical for states regarded as not fully democratic. This was strongly an issue of for example Olympic Summer Games in Beijing in 2008. Therefore the first aim of the article is to analyze whether Russia intended to improve its international image by hosting the Olympic Games and whether it succeeded.

The second part of the article will concern the events in the Ukraine that resulted in annexation of Crimea by Russian Federation. Although the political crisis in Ukraine began before the Sochi Olympics, it appears that Russian involvement became heavier after the Olympic flame was distinguished in Sochi. Such a situation leads to certain doubts concerning the policy of Russia and its president Vladimir Putin. Obviously at the moment information about the true intentions and plans of V. Putin are uncertain. It appears though, that he did not want the political crisis to affect the course of the Games. Moreover, if the purpose of hosting the Olympic Games was to improve international image of Russia, than why did Putin decide to involve Russia in the Ukrainian crisis and to annex Crimea? Was it a planned strategy or an unplanned reaction to political unrests in Ukraine? The hypothesis to be investigated in this part states that by annexing Crimea, Russia squandered all the possible positive effects of the Sochi 2014 Olympic Games in terms of its international image.

The research will be conducted under the interpretativist paradigm which seems to be the most appropriate in analyzing such a complicated reality as the international perception of a state in respect to two important events: the Olympics in Sochi and the annexation of Crimea. The research encompassed studying of statements of high profile policy makers and journalist from various countries, in order to deduce the changing attitude towards Russia, which obviously required an interpretation of their words. Accordingly, the data was collected mainly by analyzing press articles and interviews. This enabled not only the main analysis of the change of attitude towards Russia worldwide, but also to determine the main objectives behind organizing the Olympic Winter Games in 2014 by the Russian city of Sochi.

Election of Sochi as the Host of the Olympic Winter Games 2014

The Russian city of Sochi was chosen as host of 2014 Olympic Winter Games on 4th July 2007, at the 119th Session of the International Olympic Committee in Guatemala City (*Sochi 2014*).

The election, according to The Olympic Charter, is constituted by two phases: the application and the candidacy, and takes place 7 years before the Games. The Session of the IOC elects the host city among the candidate cities – those applicant cities that were accepted to the latter phase of election by the IOC Executive Board (Olympic Charter 68–69).

In the case of the election of the host of the XXII Olympic Winter Games in 2014, there were seven applicant cities: Sochi (Russia), Salzburg (Austria), Jaca (Spain), Almaty (Kazakhstan), PyeongChang (Korea), Sofia (Bulgaria), and Borjomi (Georgia). All those cities were evaluated by the IOC Candidature Acceptance Working Group, which took into consideration such elements as: government support, legal issues and public opinion; general infrastructure; sports venues; Olympic village(s); environmental conditions and impact; accommodation; transport concept; safety and security; experience from past sports events; finance and overall project and legacy, with different weighting of different issues. All the results in each issue were evaluated mathematically in order to present the final results in a table (Report by the IOC Candidature Acceptance Working Group 9, 11–12).

Table 1. Results of the IOC Candidature Acceptance Working Group evaluation

Final Result

Applicant Cities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sochi											
Salzburg											
Jaca											
Almaty											
PyeongChang											
Sofia											
Borjomi											

Source: Report by the IOC Candidature Acceptance Working Group to the IOC Executive Board. XXII Olympic Winter Games in 2014, Lausanne 28 April 2006

On the basis of the IOC Working Group report, summarized by the table above, on 22nd June 2006 the IOC's Executive Board selected three applicant cities to be forwarded to the Candidature phase (*Sochi 2014*). Apparently the Executive Board must have taken into consideration the recommendations by the Working Group,

as three cities with the best evaluation have been forwarded: Sochi, Salzburg, and PyeongChang.

According to the procedure of electing the host city of the Olympic Games, once the candidate cities are selected, the IOC President appoints an Evaluation Commission, which studies the candidatures, inspects the sites and on that basis prepares a report for the IOC Members (Olympic Charter 69). In the report the Commission evaluates each candidate city in various categories, relatively similar to those from the first phase of the election. In this case they were as follows: Olympic Games Concept and Legacy, Political and Economic Climate and Structure, Legal Matters, Customs and Immigration Formalities, Environment and Meteorology, Finance, Marketing, Sports and Venues, Olympic Villages, Paralympic Games, Medical Services and Doping Control, Security, Accommodation, Transport, Media Operations, Olympism and Culture (IOC 2014 Evaluation Commission Report 10–28).

In the summaries each of the candidatures has been evaluated shortly in the key dimensions. Generally all of them were rated positively. Each of the bids had financial guarantees from national governments that were willing to cover any possible shortfalls of the budgets, as well as all three concepts of the Games were evaluated positively. In the case of Sochi, the Commission noted that the completion of the infrastructure projects was critical for the Games. Salzburg, on the other hand, was criticized for the presentation lacking details, number of hotel rooms slightly below requirements, underestimating resources required for security operations and low budget comparing to previous Olympics. Therefore Salzburg's bid seemed to be rated lowest. The Commission did not have substantial objections towards Korean bid, praised it for credible budget and noted, that the Olympic Games would contribute to peace and harmony on Korean Peninsula (IOC 2014 Evaluation Commission Report 67–72). Apparently the events before the previous Olympics organized by South Korea, especially the desire to co-host the Games by North Korea, did not raise any doubts towards PyeongChang's candidacy.

The election of the host city of the Olympic Games requires an absolute majority of votes. If no city gains the required number of votes, the one with lowest support is eliminated and the Members of the IOC vote again. In case of the election of the 2014 Olympic Winter Games Salzburg was eliminated in the 1st round, while Sochi

was elected by narrow margin in the 2nd round. The exact results have been presented below.

Table 2. Results of the election of the host of the XXII Olympic Winter Games in 2014

Round	1	2
Sochi	34	51
PyeongChang	36	47
Salzburg	25	

Source: www.olympic.org

As can be noted, the IOC Session seemed to have taken into consideration remarks of the Evaluation Commission. As was mentioned, the biggest objections regarded the Salzburg's bid and this candidate city was ruled out first. Korean city PyeongChang was in the lead in the first round, but eventually received four points less in the final voting. Worth mentioning, it was the PyeongChang that was seen as a favorite and the final outcome was rather unexpected.

From the very beginning Russian president Vladimir Putin was strongly involved in the idea of organizing the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, to that extent that he personally led the formal presentation during the International Olympic Committee Session in Guatemala City (Zakarhovich). He spoke about great location of the city – spring weather at the seashore and winter with guaranteed snow in the mountains, promised that Olympic cluster in Sochi would be completed on time and guaranteed that there would be no traffic jams (*Russia Awarded Its First Winter Games*). His personal presence was seen as a great benefit for the Sochi bid, similarly to the British Prime Minister Tony Blair supporting London's candidacy for the 2012 Summer Olympics. As one of the IOC Members Jean-Claude Killy evaluated the presence of Russian President, "The Putin charisma can explain four votes." He also noted, that Vladimir Putin "spoke English and French, what he never does" (Delany, O'Flynn).

The Russian bid was criticized for various reasons. Austrian Chancellor was supposed to have said after the election of Sochi, that "Salzburg didn't stand a chance....It was an economic and political power play...which indicates the way they want to go from now on, and this is wrong for the sport and for the IOC and Olympic Movement" (Zarakhovich). Despite the obvious aggrieved tone in this statement, it is true that in the aspect of financing it was hard

to compete with Sochi's bid – Vladimir Putin pledged \$12 billion for Sochi's development during his pre-vote speech in Guatemala City (Delany, O'Flynn).

Thus, it was decided by the International Olympic Committee Session that it would be Sochi hosting the Olympic Winter Games in 2014. It must be said that the IOC takes various criteria in selecting the Olympic Games host city, such as organizational capability, geographical (alternation of regions of the World), traditional and political (Kobierecki, *Polityczne implikacje* 102–106). It appears that currently, once the Olympic Games gained enormous popularity and an unquestioned status of a sports mega-event, the organizational capability is the most important factor for selecting a particular bid. Other criteria are rather supplementary. Sochi's candidature had strong financial guarantees given personally by the President of Russia Vladimir Putin and it must have been a great advantage. But the bid of Korean PyeongChang appeared as a choice just as safe in this matter. Accordingly, it appears that political aspect may have played its role as well. Sochi candidature was closely bound with Putin, so the final, unexpected decision could be derived from his personal image as a leader of Russia. The words of Jean-Claude Killy, cited earlier, seem to confirm this statement.

Sochi 2014 and its meaning for Russia

Once Sochi was elected as the host of the Olympic Winter Games in 2014, the preparations began. According to the plans of Russian organizers, the Olympics were to be the most extravagant in the history of Winter Games. The project included construction of high-speed rail line and a road between Sochi and the mountains (Harrison), as well as sports venues and two Olympic villages. Almost everything was to be built from scratch – 85 percent of the infrastructure needed, according to chair of the International Olympic Committee's coordination commission for the Sochi Games Jean-Claude Killy (*Most expensive Olympics in history*).

The Olympic Winter Games in Sochi are believed to be the most expensive in Games' history. Russian Ministry of Regional Development estimated it to have cost around \$42 billion (Karnaukh). However, according to calculations by various experts, the cost of preparing and hosting the Olympics in 2014 was \$51 billion, although it is very difficult to rate the expenditures precisely as the sums

have been artificially inflated by the private sponsors of the Olympics, according to Igor Nikolaev, director of a department in one of Russian audit groups (*Most expensive Olympics in history, Russia's \$9.4B road to Sochi latest in long line of Olympic boondoggles*). As he said, the private sector tried to qualify as much of their expenses as possible as the Olympic costs, which would later serve as their advantage in applying for instance for preferential tariffs (Gibson, *Sochi 2014*, Gibson, *Sochi Games*). After all the Sochi Olympics were a great aim and ambition of Vladimir Putin, so Russian companies involved in the Olympics wanted their contribution to appear as big as possible.

Sochi cost a lot more than other contemporary Olympics – London 2012 is believed to have cost \$13.9 billion, while China is believed to have spent \$43 billion on the Beijing 2008 Olympics (Gibson, *Sochi 2014*). It must be mentioned here, that summer Olympics are a far more complicated and far bigger event than the winter ones. The following numbers can serve as an example of such disproportion: in London about 10,500 athletes competed in 26 sports across 34 venues, whereas in Sochi there were around 2,800 athletes participating in 7 sports across 10 venues (*Sports, Sochi 2014 Venues, How many athletes and countries took part in the 2014 Games in Sochi?*, LONDON 2012).

There are various reason why the Sochi Olympics were so expensive. Apart from the fact that they were meant to be the best in history, the whole concept of organizing a winter sports event in a basically subtropical city at Black Sea coastline was extraordinary, and costly at the same time. For instance in case of melting of the snow there were 450,000 cubic meters stored (Vaughan). What is more, it is believed that plenty of money has “disappeared in corrupt building contracts.” According to Russian oppositionists Leonid Martynyuk and Boris Nemtsov, up to \$30 billion have been lost because of “absence of fair competition, clan politics and the strictest censorship about anything related to the Olympic Games” (Gibson, *Sochi 2014*).

The key question here is what and how Vladimir Putin wanted to achieve with the use of the Olympic Games in Sochi? Putin himself in one of the interviews stated the aims of hosting this sports mega-event. The Russian president spoke about the need to build a tourist destination within the Russia, as the Russians are on the top of the list of nations traveling for holidays abroad; developing the South of the country in terms of infrastructure; establishing training facilities for Russian athletes. He also said, that through

the Olympics he would want the world to see “a new Russia, see its personality and its possibilities, take a fresh and unbiased look at the country,” which would help Russia to establish relations with its partners around the world (*I want Sochi Games to show the world a new Russia – Putin*). On another occasion Putin also said that he hoped Sochi would help “build bridges” (Rosenberg). These were obviously the declared aims only. It must be noted though, that Vladimir Putin did not hide that one of the key aims was to show Russia in a positive light, which means to enhance its international image. This seems typical for organizers of sports mega-events, regardless the political system of the hosting state. Still, it appears that the desire to build positive state’s image through sport is greater in non-democratic countries, similarly to the case of the Olympics in Beijing.

A question appears though, whether there were also other reasons for organizing the Olympics in Sochi? Observers pointed out various reasons, such as that the aim was to demonstrate both to the world and to Russians that Putin had restored wealth and pride to Russia and that Putin himself was frightened of nothing – to show that Russia was back and that stability had returned to Causacus, as Jeffrey Mankoff from the Center for Strategic and International Studies said (Rubin). As a journalist Mark Mackinnon stated, Putin’s dream is to see “Russia as once again a global center of gravity, indispensable on the world stage...the leader of a new bloc of nations – the Eurasian Union – with borders that look a lot like those of the Soviet empire, whose fall he has openly mourned.”

Considering the opinions of the observers and public statements of Vladimir Putin leads to a conclusion that the main aim of organizing the Olympic Winter Games in 2014 was to show Russia as a powerful, wealthy country and a regional leader. Putin is believed to have restored Russian pride, weakened by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Sochi Olympics were then meant to show, as Putin said himself, the new Russia, strong again. The message was to be directed to Russians most of all, but also to the rest of the world.

Such use of sport, aimed to project the image of state, scholars describe as one of the dimensions of sports diplomacy, which can be perceived as a perfect channel of sharing state’s identity, values and brand (Pigman, Rofe). Sports diplomacy as a rule is directed towards the external actors, such as societies of other countries, but the case of Sochi Olympics appears to have had internal meaning

as well. Accordingly to what has already been said, the Games were meant, *inter alia*, to project the masculinist image of Russia, as a country powerful enough to restore the past significance of the Soviet Union. Obviously, such message was mostly directed to the people of Russia, as internationally this could be understood negatively, with the exception to societies that were already under strong Russian influence.

Putin's aim in organizing the Olympics was not only to show Russia strong, but also civilized. Prior to the Olympics, Putin even initiated a so called "charm offensive," within which he set up special protests zones on the outskirts of Sochi and declared amnesty for several high profile political prisoners such as Pussy Riot activists or Mikhail Chodorkovsky (Wiertz). Still, the power of Russia was probably the key issue.

This message was to be sent during the Sochi Olympics in various ways, each planned to show them as special. One of the first dimensions was the Olympic torch relay. Its tradition can be traced back to the 1936 Olympic Summer Games in Berlin and it is meant to promote such issues as peace, human rights, and democracy (Barney, Bijkerk: 253–254; Karamichas; Amelidou: 127), at least according to the objectives. On some occasions Olympic torch relay also had political connotations. This was especially an issue of the Beijing Olympics torch relay, when protests against China not respecting human rights and occupying Tibet occurred in various cities during the relay, such as Paris or London (Walker, Batty; Burns).

Russian organizers of the Olympics wanted their torch relay to be record-breaking, the longest ever for instance. The Olympic flame was carried to a few extraordinary locations, such as peak of Europe's highest mountain Mount Elbrus, the bottom of world's deepest Lake Baikal, and to the International Space Station (Walker, *Winter Olympics torch*). Lately, there is a tendency of achieving extraordinary places on the Olympic flame's route: for instance, the Chinese carried it to the summit of Mount Everest before the Beijing Olympics (Wong). At the same time, the Olympic torch relay is meant to present a country hosting the Olympics to the world in a desirable way. This was one of the purposes of Sochi torch relay. As Vladimir Putin once said, it was meant to "show the world Russia as she is and as we love her." Contrary to his intentions, the relay met Greenpeace activists protesting against drilling in the Arctic, gay rights protesters, had to be shortened in Dagestan because

of security reasons, whereas the torch itself got extinguished a couple of times (Walker, *Winter Olympics torch*). Still, it must be noticed that according to plans and intentions the Olympic flame relay was meant to show Russia in a good light, in other words, to enhance its international image.

It is typical that the organizers of sports mega-events desire to impress the world with the venues. For example, the organizers of the Beijing Olympics wanted to impress with Olympic Stadium “Bird’s Nest” and “Water Cube” where aquatic competitions were held. Sochi seems to have not had such extraordinary venues, however each of them was applauded by the athletes (Williams). It was similar with the opening ceremony, another element that makes it easy to promote the organizer worldwide. As in most such cases, it was planned to promote Russian culture and heritage, but according to most observers did not stand out from the previous Olympic ceremonies, especially comparing to London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony which was evaluated extremely well. On the other hand, the Games in Sochi faced many imperfections such as unfinished hotels (Dewey) that were affecting the overview of the Games.

As for the opening ceremony, there were also some political controversies concerning the Olympics in Sochi. As a matter of fact, the event was an object of a boycott by various politicians, who resigned from participating in it. This was especially caused by the law banning “gay propaganda” that was imposed in Russia. Therefore, a number of political leaders from various countries, such as Barack Obama, David Cameron, or Angela Merkel, decided not to participate in the ceremony (Walker, *Sochi Winter Olympics*).

Despite some minor imperfections, Russians succeeded in impressing the world with the use of the Olympics in Sochi. For instance, they managed to win in the prestigious Olympic medal table – a measure that considers gold medals won by a nation, than silver ones in case more than one team have won the same amount of gold ones, and respectively bronze medals. The table is called unofficial as the International Olympic Committee does not approve it, nevertheless in the contemporary world constructing it is so common that it is even published on the Olympic Games host’s website. In Sochi the top of this table was as below.

Table 3. Olympic Medal Table Sochi 2014

Rank	Country	Gold Medal	Silver Medals	Bronze Medal	Total
1	Russian Fed.	13	11	9	33
2	Norway	11	5	10	26
3	Canada	10	10	5	25
4	United States	9	7	12	28
5	Netherlands	8	7	9	24

Source: <http://www.sochi2014.com/en/medals>

The political use of the Olympic medal table is quite typical, although this applies rather to summer Games. Sports race with political meaning was typical for the Cold War era, but also in more contemporary world states wanted to show themselves as powerful by winning the Olympic medal table, for instance China during Olympics in Beijing 2008. At the same time, it is typical that the hosting country of sports mega-event desires to perform well on its own soil (Kobierecki, *Sportowy wymiar*: 37–87). Sports successes are regarded as proof of various characteristics of a country, including its power. Only big, wealthy, and powerful states are able to perform well in multi-sports events such as the Olympics, so it is partly similar to the organizational dimension of such events. Therefore, states that desire an image of strong and powerful often struggle to train as many good athletes as possible.

As can be seen in the table above, Russia succeeded in this dimension of the Olympics, although it did not achieve all the main athletic goals. Vladimir Putin did not hide that he hoped most of all for the victory in ice hockey, whereas the Russian team lost to Finland 3–1 in quarter-final and did not win a medal (Chadband). Despite this disappointment, Russian athletes performed really well in Sochi, considering that 4 years earlier during the Vancouver Olympic Winter Games Russian Federation finished 11th with only 3 gold medals (*Winter Olympics 2010*).

Despite a number of negative aspects such as the mentioned unfinished hotels or lack of some high profile world leaders on the opening ceremony, the Sochi Olympics were evaluated very positively worldwide. As one of the journalists stated, “things went surprisingly well from an organizational standpoint. The venues were state-of-the-art, buses were on time, and, most important of all, security held up and the Games were terrorism-free” (Kaufman). Sochi’s PR indeed was bad before the Games, but the Games in the end were

regarded as a success. The volunteers were especially praised for being helpful and kind (Walker, *Winter Olympic volunteers*). Another thing is whether Vladimir Putin actually achieved his goals by organizing the Olympic Games in Sochi? As was stated earlier, his intentions most probably involved showing Russia as strong and powerful again, both to Russians and to the world. He also wanted to show Russia as a civilized, developed, peaceful state, contrary to its aggressive perception derived from the Cold War times.

It appears that Vladimir Putin, despite a few mishaps, used the occasion of hosting the Olympic Games according to his intentions. By organizing a winter sports mega-event in a sub-tropical area for an astronomic sum of around \$51 billion he sent a clear signal to the world – that Russia is capable of anything. Few countries in the world would be able to devote as much for a sports event. Moreover, success of the athletes and enormous growth of medal won comparing to the previous Winter Olympics also was evidence for the power of Russia. The behavior of Russians working at the Games, the volunteers most of all, on the other hand worked as an evidence of the civilized attitude of Russia. This was additionally enhanced by Putin's steps before the games, such as releasing the imprisoned Mikhail Chodorkovsky. All of those facts testify for the hypothesis that Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games were successful in terms of enhancing Russia's international perception.

Russian Involvement in the Crimean Crisis

The political events known as the Crimean Crisis were precluded by the so called 2014 Ukrainian revolution, which needs to be described shortly. The whole situation started when President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych decided not to sign an association agreement with the European Union in November 2013, due to Russia's pressure as it is believed. Shortly after, tens of thousands Ukrainians began their protests in Kiev (Grytsenko). The number of protesters quickly began to rise despite attacks by the police, to reach 800,000 in early December. Soon Ukrainian President Yanukovych received support from Vladimir Putin, as Russia agreed to buy \$15 billion of Ukrainian debt and to reduce prices of gas that Russia delivers to Ukraine (*Ukraine crisis timeline*).

Since then the situation calmed down, but several hundred people remained on the Independence Square in Kiev and kept

protesting. The crisis got escalated again in the mid-January 2014, when Ukrainian parliament passed anti-protest law (*Ukraine parliament pushes through sweeping anti-protest law*). Soon the talks of the oppositionists with Ukrainian president failed and first protesters got killed during clashes with police (Polityuk, Zinets; Danilova, Karmanau). As a result the anti-governmental protests expanded beyond Kiev and protesters began to storm regional offices in cities of Western Ukraine (*Ukraine unrest*). The governmental side seemed to step back and the situation began to calm down again due to an offer of amnesty for all the detained protesters (Olearchyk). The clashes erupted again though on 18th February (*Ukraine: Deadly clashes around parliament in Kiev*). This time the situation got much more violent with plenty of people killed, especially on 20th February when police used snipers and live ammunition (Traynor). In this situation an agreement between Victor Yanukovych and the oppositional politicians was signed, according to which a national unity government was to be installed and the presidential elections were to take place by the end of the year (*Ukrainian president and opposition sign early poll deal*). Shortly after the president disappeared and the Ukrainian parliament removed him from his position. Olexander Turchynov was selected as an interim president, while Arseniy Yatsenyuk was nominated as prime minister on 26th February (*Ukraine crisis timeline*).

The Olympic Games in Sochi ended on 23rd February, at the same time when the political crisis in Ukraine was beginning to fade. Only a few days later unexpected occurrences began to be held in Crimean Peninsula, a territory that was transferred from Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954. Beginning from 27th February, armed men began to seize government buildings in Simferopol, the capital of Crimea (Salem, Walker, Harding). According to observers, the gunmen were in fact Russian soldiers with no badges on their uniforms, however it was not confirmed. Soon the Russian involvement in Crimea began to be even more evident, especially after Russia's upper house of parliament approved Putin's request to use Russian forces in Ukraine (*Russian parliament approves troop deployment in Ukraine*). Russian troops also appeared in Crimea, although they were in unmarked uniforms and did not admit being Russians, Vladimir Putin admitted in April that there were Russian soldiers operating in Crimea, even though he earlier claimed they were self-defense forces (Karmanau, Isachenkov). Involvement of Russia is evident then.

On 6th March, the local parliament of Crimea and city council of Sevastopol voted in favor of joining Russia and declared a referendum to be held 10 days later (*Sevastopol and Crimean parliament vote to join Russia, referendum to be held in 10 days*). The referendum, boycotted by various groups such as Crimean Tatars, was declared a great win by separatists. According to official results, 83.1 percent of eligible population voted and 96.77 percent were in favor of joining Russia. On 17th March, Crimean local parliament voted to break away from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. This happened officially on 18th March when Vladimir Putin signed the treaty of annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol (Morello, Englund, Witte; Brenner; Smith, Eshchenko).

The background of Russian annexation of Crimea has been described shortly above. The occurrences raise a question concerning the rationale for such decisions by Vladimir Putin. Apparently, there seem to be two explanations. The first one concerns the majority of ethnic Russians among Crimean population. Such circumstances obviously may have led to Russian involvement. The second reason may be connected with political events in Ukraine prior to the Crimean Crisis. President Viktor Yanukovych, who was in favor of close bounds with Russia instead of European Union, was ousted from the post. Such a situation resembles the one in Afghanistan in 1979. Ukraine floating towards the West meant the deterioration of the Russian area of influence. Putin, on the other hand, wants Russia to be strong. Showing such a Russia was one of the objectives of organizing the Sochi Olympics. Annexing Crimea could be seen as more proof of that by showing that Russia is capable of defending its compatriots. Moreover, Putin's aim in Ukraine most probably was, and still is, to destabilize the situation in hope of either spreading the country or making it float back towards Moscow.

Russian involvement in Ukraine may at the same time draw conclusions concerning the PR reasons for hosting the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi. As has been noted, a number of possible motivations can be listed, such as the desire to show Russia powerful and civilized, both to the people of Russia and to the world. Vladimir Putin ceased any further actions concerning Ukraine until the Olympic were over, probably in order to avoid political controversies during the event. Both occurrences seem to show Russia from the completely different perspective, but at the same time some commonalities between them can be seen. It may be assumed that if the main objective of Sochi Olympics was to show Russia powerful, then the key aim of the involvement in the Ukraine might

have been similar. In respect to such assumption there was no dissonance between the two events. Such prepositions implies however, that all other objectives of the Sochi Olympics, such as showing Russia in good light to international audience, were additional and minor only.

Russia's International Image after the Crimean Crisis in the Context of the Sochi Olympics

The occurrences in Crimea, as well as the latter approaches to destabilize the situation particularly in eastern Ukraine, led to vast criticism from the international community. Sanctions were imposed on Russia, however they are usually described as minor and encompassed mostly travel bans and assets freezes imposed on individuals and companies (*Ukraine crisis: Russian officials targeted by sanctions*). States, especially European ones, seemed to appreciate economical bounds with Russia and were uneager to cut them.

On the other hand, a completely new attitude towards Russia could be seen in statements of high profile international politicians or journalists, who condemned Russia and its president for the events in Ukraine. In fact, only a very few world leaders supported Putin in his policy towards Ukraine, such as Afghanistan's government, the president of Venezuela Nicolas Maduro, and Syria's president Bashar al-Assad (Wachnicki). Even Alexander Lukashenko, President of Belarus, close ally of Russia, said that Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea was setting a "bad precedent," although in the end he also recognized Russia's annexation of Crimea (*Belarus Says Russia's Annexation of Crimea Sets a 'Bad Precedent'*).

Apart from a few examples mentioned above, the vast majority of states condemned Putin. American President Barack Obama said, for instance, that Russia was no more than a "regional power" whose actions in Ukraine were an expression of weakness rather than strength (Borger). German Chancellor Angela Merkel called Russia's effort towards annexing Crimea "the imperialism of past centuries" (Parkin, Buergin). French President Francois Hollande said on March 18, that "Crimea's joining Russia is "unacceptable" and France will never recognize legality of such actions" (*President Hollande: France doesn't recognize Crimea's annexation by Russia*). Poland was especially harsh in criticizing Russia's policy concerning

Crimea and Ukraine in general. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk commented it saying, that the international community cannot accept the annexation of Crimea and compared the situation to the Yalta Conference (*Annexation of Crimea by Russia? Tusk talks about the new Jalta*).

The new, negative perception of Russia can be interpreted not only from official statements of political leaders, but also from all sort of other controversies that appear. One of them worth mentioning concerns former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. He was criticized by the international media after pictures showing him embracing Vladimir Putin during his birthday party in Sankt Petersburg were published. Shortly after, German government distanced itself with Schroeder (Kirschbaum, Barkin; Glanfield). In this case the condemnation of Gerhard Schroeder was massive. Obviously, there are also other signs of negative attitude towards Russia after the Crimean Crisis. For example, in Poland some hotel owners refused to host guests from Russia (Otto). Although such situations are occasional, especially in the Western societies a change of attitude towards Russia is visible. According to survey undertaken by Gallup, 68 percent of Americans perceive Russia as “unfriendly” or as the “enemy” and these figures have grown recently – before the crisis such perception shared 44 percent, in 2006 only 20 percent (Swift).

It can be said that Russia and its president Vladimir Putin have been criticized and condemned by the world, especially by the West, in respect to the events in Crimea. However, it appears that the negative attitude towards Russia is not comprehensive and most of the states still give priority to economic benefits of trading with Russia. This could be clearly seen in the issue of international sanctions against Russia, which have been relatively soft and directed against single people instead of the whole country. The main steps included assets freezes and visa bans (*EU imposes new sanctions against Russia after Putin signs bill annexing Crimea*). Russia was also ousted from the G8 Group and NATO suspended cooperation with Moscow (Smale, Shear; Croft, Siebold). On the other hand, France did not resign from the \$1.66 billion contract to supply Russia with Mistral warships (Irish, Pennetier, Pineau), while Austrian company OMV has signed with Russia’s Gazprom a memorandum to build a spur from the South Stream pipeline to Austria (*UPDATE 2-OMV and Gazprom press on with Austrian branch of South Stream gas pipeline*). Such situations, which are not exactly rare, imply that although the critics towards Russia is massive and the

perception of this country has deteriorated after the Crimean Crisis, there has not been a deep and comprehensive change of the Russia's image so far.

Conclusions

Vladimir Putin did not hide the main objectives of hosting the Olympic Games in Sochi. They were aimed at showing both to the world and to its own citizens the new Russia, strong as it once was. They were also aimed to make Russia more attractive in establishing relations with other countries. Thus, the objective of hosting Olympic Winter Games was to enhance Russia's soft power. As it appears, Russia did succeed in achieving this aim. Although the Games showed Russia as not fully efficient, concerning to what extent the budget was exceeded and that the last works were being done just before the Games' opening, they also showed that no matter how big the obstacles are, the Russia's priority goals would be accomplished.

It remains a puzzle, why after achieving such difficult and expensive purpose as described above, Vladimir Putin decided to take a completely opposite step just as the Olympics were finished. By involving in the crisis in Ukraine and eventually annexing the Crimean Peninsula, he completely changed the way Russia was perceived abroad. All the positive emotions evoked by the Sochi Olympics were changed towards condemnation of Russian policy, although this change of attitude is not complete.

The answer to this puzzle is possible if it is assumed that showing Russia to the world as a civilized country (as the "new Russia") was only an additional aim, whereas the main objective was to project image of Russia as a powerful state, capable of fulfilling its goals and that the objects of such projection were the Russian people and possibly societies of the countries already under Russian influence. In compliance with such assumption, the purpose of annexing Crimea was at least partly similar to the Sochi Olympics objective – to project dominant self-imaginary of the Russian state.

Concerning the facts above, it appears that the hypothesis that by annexing Crimea Russia squandered all the possible positive effects of the Sochi 2014 Olympic Games is partly confirmed. Of course it did negatively change the perception of Russia, especially in the West, but concerning the fact that the main purpose of the

Games was to show Russia's strength, the annexation of Crimea was just another prove of that, at the same time showing the incapacity of the international community to prevent it. Still, it appears that the annexation was not planned before the political crisis in Ukraine.

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